1. Introduction: Best Practices in Local Government and Democracy in Mexico

This chapter analyzes the endogenous capacities needed to adapt best practices in governance based on the experience of the Mexico’s Government and Local Management Award (GLMA). Processes of innovation and best practices in Mexican local governments have developed over the past fifteen years as a result of the country’s democratic transition, which is moving Mexico away from the semi-authoritarian and highly centralized regime that predominated during most of the twentieth century. Beginning in the second half of the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, Mexican municipalities initiated a new phase in their history thanks to a number of reforms which introduced greater democracy at the local level and enhanced the municipalities’ autonomy from federal and state institutions. In other words, innovation and the search for better administrative practices were an outgrowth of this new, more evolved era of municipal public management. Progressively, each innovation is helping build the modern image of the municipal institution as an entity in continuous adaptation and interaction with parallel processes of democratic reform, decentralization, local development and the evolution of intergovernmental relations, not to mention its impact on civil society.

The relationship between democratic transition and innovation in local management does not imply that, in general, every innovation depends on this political condition. Yet, in the case of Mexico, the new democratic scenario played a predominant role in creating an enabling environment for innovation given: a) the appearance of new political and social actors in the municipal arena; b) their incorporation in local governments’ public affairs and processes; c) new parameters in the relationship between society and government; d) political and legislative changes in intergovernmental structures; and e) new ways to identify and solve local public sector problems.

The democratic process significantly modified the social and institutional structures of Mexican municipalities, paving the way for innovation. The greater interaction between citizens and local government, especially in the 1980s, made it possible to transcend traditional processes and practices by altering how public affairs were run, how previously unavailable material and social resources were used, and, finally, by improving the community’s quality of life.

It is important to note that the process of democratic transition is not over yet, either at the local or the national and state levels. Deepening democracy and modernizing the administrative structures of municipalities is part of that process. Despite important advances made to date, there are still significant challenges in this respect. In addition, the introduction of good government practices and innovative programs is affected by the municipalities’ institutional inheritance, which endures to some degree and inhibits
the expansion of these initiatives. Hence, innovation grows within a complex relationship between the traditional institutional framework and the search for new ways to provide public services; as one might expect, this process is not free of tensions.

The evolution of municipal government institutions and its innovations is affected simultaneously by two dynamics that, together, can act as inhibiting factors. First, there are the traditional aspects of the municipalities’ institutional inheritance that support authoritarianism, discretionary decisions, corruption, inefficiency and social inequality. Second, processes that are external to the municipality determine its fundamental characteristics: the centralization of institutions and programs of the federal and state governments, for example, or the preservation of regulations that limit the municipalities’ capacity for public intervention or intergovernmental negotiation.

Innovations simultaneously encounter forces of resistance and encouragement. In general terms, innovations develop within the context of the traditional molds of the state structure, the political system and culture – while, at the same time, they are also affected by more progressive factors within those institutions. In different degrees and forms, each innovation reflects elements of both modernity and tradition, a situation which is not surprising at this stage in the evolution of the Mexican state. From this perspective, innovations reflect the positive balance of this contradictory scenario. They are programs that transcend their traditional limitations and replace inertia with action.

The accumulation of best practices is part of the ongoing development of government and municipal administration. Each experience is a piece of a new municipal institutional puzzle, whose relevance lies not in itself, but in its capacity to contribute concrete real-world solutions to the challenges of development and democratic participation.

We conclude that, in Mexico, the process of democratic transition and its effect on the municipalities has generated great capacity for social and institutional evolution, even though it is developing in the context of the modern/traditional friction described above. Overall, we are talking about macro-social potential, which is present in different degrees throughout the country, albeit in a dispersed and fragmented fashion. Although innovation can be seen throughout the country’s municipalities, it exhibits strong endogenous features and is characterized by poor communication and dialogue with other experiences and municipalities. To better disseminate innovations, the municipalities must improve horizontal communication and collective learning among governments and local societies.

2. Innovation in Government and Best Practices in Mexico

Innovation in Mexico is broad and diverse; its presence is felt in practically all regions of the country. At the same time, it is a profoundly individual process brought about by specific local factors. Although communication between municipalities has improved notably in the last few years – particularly through the creation of associations of municipalities – the capacities and lessons of innovation have not developed to their full potential because of a lack of mechanisms for disseminating and transferring successful practices. The most noteworthy achievement with respect to improved
communication is the work of the Government and Local Management Award (GLMA; www.premiomunicipal.org.mx) given by the CIDE and sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Even here, although its contribution is valuable, the Award’s capacities are not sufficient to meet the municipalities’ demand for horizontal communication that better systematizes and disseminates the lessons of innovative experiences.

The purpose of the GLMA is to identify, evaluate, acknowledge and disseminate the best municipal government experiences in Mexico and to promote academic research in this area. Each phase of the Award process involves different tasks that touch on a broad range of specialists (academics, professional experts and representatives of social organizations related to the municipalities), institutions from the federal government and the states related to the municipalities, and the municipalities and their associations. The Award has only a small administrative organization to promote all of these activities, with help from a Technical Council of Academics and a Council of Institutions. These institutions and individuals have built a collaborative network across the country that includes government, academic and research institutions, and civil organizations.

As a result of its activities, the GLMA has Mexico’s broadest infrastructure and most extensive institutional network for achieving the tasks of identification, evaluation, analysis, acknowledgment and diffusion of best municipal government practices. Despite limited resources, the GLMA has maintained high quality work between 2001 and 2005. However, with additional resources, the GLMA could do more, particularly with regard to the diffusion of best experiences in order to increase their transfer potential.

With this caveat, the innovations and best practices compiled by the GLMA can be considered a reasonable indication of the programs that Mexican municipalities have produced over the last five years. Without doubt, the Award experiences databank does not capture all of Mexico’s innovative programs; no statistical or documentary source offers such complete information. In any case, the registered programs comprise a representative sample that allows us to find the best local practices and identify their actors, the priorities of their political agendas, their social bases, regional characteristics, and cultural and electoral variations, among other elements. The 1,760 programs registered at the GLMA between 2001 and 2004 allow us to describe some general features of the innovation processes carried out by local governments in Mexico.

**Figure VII.1.**

MUNICIPAL PARTICIPATION BY GOVERNING POLITICAL PARTY
GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL MANAGEMENT AWARD
In political terms, innovations appear to be possible in practically all contexts and possibilities offered by the country’s electoral framework. In Mexico, citizens are represented in municipalities by national political parties; the three main ones are Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). The indigenous municipalities are the exception; in the state of Oaxaca they are able to govern themselves through traditional systems that exclude the national political parties. In the figure VII.1., the indigenous governments are denominated as “others,” along with other minor national- or state-based parties.

In general terms, as shown by the programs registered by the Award, political orientation is not a variable that particularly constrains or promotes good government practices. It is possible to identify innovative programs across the political spectrum; in general, innovation is not especially associated with a municipality’s political orientation.
If we review the innovative programs with regard to population size, we find good government practices in small as well as large municipalities (Figure VII.2.). In our analysis, we classified municipalities with populations of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants as small, more than 50,000 and fewer than 500,000 as medium, and more than 500,000 as large. Innovative practices did not depend on a municipality’s size or on the resources involved. The programs registered by the Award describe creative experiences whose quality does not depend on the magnitude of social, economic or material resources, but rather on the particular arrangements that lead to more efficient public goods and services. In this respect, the scale of a program is not equivalent either to its quality or its capacity to meet social demands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small</td>
<td>51.00%</td>
<td>36.81%</td>
<td>44.58%</td>
<td>37.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>17.00%</td>
<td>41.66%</td>
<td>40.96%</td>
<td>48.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large</td>
<td>32.00%</td>
<td>21.53%</td>
<td>14.46%</td>
<td>14.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additionally, and as shown by Figure VII.3., the locations of innovative programmes are broadly distributed across the southern, central, and northern regions of the country. For the four-year period under review, good practices can be identified in each of these regions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>16.19%</td>
<td>14.21%</td>
<td>32.87%</td>
<td>23.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>54.10%</td>
<td>56.55%</td>
<td>44.29%</td>
<td>52.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>29.71%</td>
<td>29.25%</td>
<td>22.85%</td>
<td>24.34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, as shown by Figure VII.3, the locations of innovative programmes are broadly distributed across the southern, central, and northern regions of the country. For the four-year period under review, good practices can be identified in each of these regions.

**Figure VII.4.**

**PARTICIPATION BY PUBLIC POLICY GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL MANAGEMENT AWARD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>% of Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological Conservation</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8.61%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10.31%</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10.42%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.41%</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>8.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Development</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10.25%</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12.81%</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8.62%</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>11.02%</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>11.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7.17%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.85%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8.02%</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>7.62%</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>7.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Infrastructure</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>14.14%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.03%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.61%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.81%</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>8.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Modernization</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11.68%</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>19.50%</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>17.84%</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>12.42%</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>15.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens Participation</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>15.16%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.36%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6.61%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.21%</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>8.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Planning</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.07%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.21%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.21%</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Policy</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.74%</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>17.55%</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>15.03%</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12.63%</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>13.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Recognition of Municipal Strengthening*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.81%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6.21%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.84%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7.38%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.74%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.21%</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.01%</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>6.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Security</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8.20%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.01%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5.41%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>5.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Services</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8.61%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.85%</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8.82%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.81%</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>7.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>488</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>414</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>1,760</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Recognition given to state governments to acknowledge municipalities who have promoted capacity-building programs.
Figure VII.4. describes the innovative programs based on the type of public policy they affect. The 13 categories used to classify the programs reveal a wide spectrum of public functions that are the object of innovative practices. Although we can identify patterns in the distribution, the relevant fact is the thematic broadness of the innovation efforts.

3. Endogenous Capacities for Innovation and Best Practices in Mexico

Looking at Mexico’s political, demographic, regional and public policy variables, we conclude that there are potential innovations with universal appeal to all municipalities, although bringing them to fruition is not automatic or spontaneous. In other words, innovation factors as well as catalysts able to convert them into a good practice exist in every context.

It is important to note that, although the factors that stimulate innovation and good practices are present in virtually every municipality, this potential is not necessarily translated into an innovative practice. Certain conditions are required to turn these possibilities into realities, which we will discuss later. For now, suffice to say that qualitative analysis is required to identify innovative factors and the conditions that can catalyze their development.

The previous reflection is relevant to the identification of endogenous capacities that allow for the generation, dissemination and replication of innovations. At least latently, social, institutional, political and cultural capacities exist in all of the country’s municipalities, although not all of the same scale or type, considering the extreme heterogeneity that characterizes municipal societies. That said, despite having different
interests or collective objectives, municipalities do still share many common characteristics. For the moment, we want to assess whether those capacities are present, even in basic forms.

A municipality’s endogenous capacities refer to how it deals with the various factors of the innovation process. These factors, whether social or institutional in nature, require certain capacities – knowledge, abilities, organization, resources – that, together, can make the innovation happen. The large number of programs in Mexico suggests that these factors and their respective capacities exist in practically all municipalities in the country.

What explains whether an innovation occurs or not is how capacities are brought together and energized. In other words, certain social actors who are closely affiliated with a given project must orchestrate the productive use of these capacities. The process can be initiated by local governments or local societies and organizations; it can also be promoted by external sources. The critical issue is that the set of actors, their respective capacities and the institutional framework proactively combine to make the innovation process happen. Consequently, the first challenge in generating and replicating innovative experiences is to identify the local capacities and the institutional or social actors who display those capacities. The second and greater challenge is to generate or stimulate productive encounters.

From a structural perspective, innovation processes can be analyzed according to their components, or factors. On the one hand, there are the social actors and their organizations, their social characteristics and the type of society in which they exist, among other elements. On the other hand, there are the institutional factors, which determine the specifics of local government, its structure and size, the characteristics of its political or administrative resources, its legal framework, etc. As one might expect, there are many such factors in each experience, because the fusion of elements in any innovation process is complex. Experience suggests that the availability of factors is not enough; as described above, the dynamic that stimulates their productive interaction is equally important.

In general, two circumstances are required to create this dynamic: a) a demand or concrete need, internal or external to the local government; and b) the simultaneous identification of that need by leading institutional or social actors. In the case of Mexico, the first circumstance is a constant in all municipalities and localities. The second is less certain, and when it does happen it tends to come from the municipal president (also known as the mayor), owing to the extensive powers and responsibilities concentrated in this figure in city councils. For this reason, in Mexico, the dynamic that galvanizes the various factors of innovation is closely associated with the agenda of the municipal president, whose significant institutional capacities may be strengthened further by personal charisma.

The GLMA programs that we analyzed re-enforce the notion that the municipal president plays a key role in activating the factors of an innovation. Although the municipal president is not the only actor who can generate this dynamic, his or her contribution is instrumental to the success of the overall process. In other words, the
leadership quality of this political figure is quite relevant to the generation, diffusion and replication of innovative programs. Clearly, it is not ideal for an innovation to be so dependent on the leadership of the municipal president. This situation is the result of Mexico’s political and electoral system, which imposes additional conditions that restrict factors for innovation; these include, in particular, a ban on the immediate re-election of elected officials (making it impossible to accumulate experience and improve the performance of municipal political and administrative bodies). Another limiting condition is the electoral system’s re-enforcement of the political parties’ monopoly in citizens’ representation, thus disabling alternative social leadership. The characteristics of Mexico’s political system severely limit the city councils’ capacity to deliver innovation and good governance.

Regarding Mexico’s endogenous capacities for municipal innovation, we conclude the following:

• Every type of municipality in Mexico has the potential to generate innovative programs, regardless of its social characteristics or the magnitude of its resources.

• Endogenous capacities – social and institutional – that make good practices possible exist in every municipality, although in different degrees and types. Overall, the difficulty to generate and replicate innovative programs is not related to endogenous capacities (without underestimating their relevance).

• Structural analysis of innovative programs allows us to define their components as “factors,” each with certain “capacities.”

• It is not enough for a municipality to possess factors and capacities for innovation; these components require activation by key participants in the innovation process. This dynamic is fundamental to the growth of good practices.

• In the case of Mexico, municipal presidents have been key actors in activating the factors of innovation, given their significant institutional powers.

4. A Look at Individual Innovative Programs

Analysis of the innovation process becomes more complex when looking at individual programs. As a starting point, we can identify four features of innovation in the municipal setting. First, within any municipal government, innovation is selective; that is, it is not undertaken simultaneously across all policies and programs, but only in some of them. Second, innovation is the constructive answer to specific, identified public demands. Third, these demands stand out as priorities in the local agenda, which makes it possible to accept the innovation as a relevant alternative capable of garnering additional public resources. The fourth feature of innovation is its links with different social and institutional actors – it is not an isolated idea or program.

In addition to the general features described above, it is important to recognize that each individual program has its own distinctive characteristics. Specifically, each innovation process depends on the influence of individual actors such as the heads of local
government and social organizations who have the capacity to adapt their economic and administrative resources to the needs of a given program. Through this mechanism, program or policy content, resources and schedules can be adapted to local characteristics and needs. This adaptation to context is indispensable for local initiatives; they cannot be achieved by general programs designed according to national or even regional criteria.

An overview of the GLMA programs reveals the broadening of public functions in response to specific local needs, as shown, for example, by local government participation in programs and policies of social, economic, environmental or educational development. We see municipal government becoming more engaged by social demands, thereby increasing the intensity and complexity of its interaction with municipal society. In addition, the expansion of public functions depends on the development of democratic governance, or at least the potential for this to occur.

The intensification and broadening of functions and links between a municipality and society are not unilateral; in fact, they require integration and interdependence made possible by the development of democratic governance. We must emphasize that, although the relationship between a municipality and society is a necessary one, it doesn’t happen automatically or without tensions. Once the broadening of municipal functions has begun, it requires careful nurturing by dedicated actors to sustain it, a phenomenon we can identify among the successful GLMA programs.

In analyzing individual programs, we see two consistent components, which, although they might begin on one side or the other, will converge at some point. Specifically, we mean that innovators are driven in one of two directions, either a) from democracy toward governmental and administrative quality or b) from governmental and administrative issues to the quality of democracy. Characteristically, we encounter both elements on the same road, coming from different directions. The programs compiled by the GLMA support our thesis that administrative quality develops the instruments of local democracy and, likewise, that local democracy stimulates the development of administrative quality. Although there are many paths to achieving such innovations, it is remarkable to see that all cases share this encounter. In other words, when the innovation comes from the side of democracy, it ends up within the scope of administrative quality; and if it comes from the side of an efficient administration, it ends up within the scope of democratic quality. The innovation challenge, from this perspective, isn’t the entry point of the process, but rather the manner of entry and the decisions and consistency with which the innovation is undertaken.

Our work in this area leads us to conclude that the basic features of an innovative program include: selectivity; the definition of a specific goal that is relevant to its locality; a process that is designed by a network of relevant actors and appropriate to the local context; strengthens the democratic base; stimulates the quality of local administration and government; and extends the municipalities’ functions and services.

5. Documentation and Replication of Innovations in Government
Innovation processes can be evaluated only if properly documented; in other words, translated into useful information. Knowledge-building, diffusion and replication related to innovative experiences require a sufficient documentary base. However, documentation poses a great challenge for societies such as Mexico’s, which are underdeveloped and characterized by emerging institutions.

Mexican municipalities demonstrate great heterogeneity in their societies’ populations and cultural roots. As such, we see urban municipalities with metropolitan characteristics, and we also find small rural and indigenous municipalities with populations of only a few hundred. The documentation experience is also heterogeneous: while in some municipalities it is almost nonexistent, in a few others it can be quite abundant. We must add that even in municipalities with plenty of resources, documentation is not always adequate to identify and evaluate innovation processes. In general, Mexican municipalities have not approached documentation as an institutional practice; even the preservation of this documentation is a common problem for local administrations.

Lack of documentation implies a great challenge in properly identifying innovation processes. In Mexico, there are three primary channels for identifying innovative experiences: academic studies; promotion by their actors; and the positive effect of awards and acknowledgments. The first two channels have had limited reach. The third has been more effective, in particular the contribution of the Government and Local Management Award.

These three channels can also be used to classify the documentation of Mexico’s innovative experiences. The most extensive database has been developed through the GLMA ceremony and its analytical and diffusion activities. As noted earlier, almost 1,800 experiences were compiled in the database between 2001 and 2004; in 2005, the database is likely to exceed 2,000 cases. In this sense, in Mexico, most innovation experiences have been documented by external actors and instances that do not belong to the local process. This fact has implications for the collective knowledge on innovation and good government; that is, the database itself represents external information that is not always in a format that facilitates transference and replication.

The preceding statement is not meant to invalidate systematic and detailed study – even by external entities – of innovation processes with an emphasis on social and administrative variables. The challenge is to transform this knowledge into recognizable information that can be integrated into one’s own experience or by other actors who may learn from it and replicate it. If this transformation does not happen, there is a risk that there will not be sufficient documentation and information on good practices to be communicated.

Therefore, the documentation challenge is a major component of the innovation process and of an innovation’s potential to generate transferable knowledge. The documentation challenge lies in contributing items to a collective memory that reflects the particular identities of multiple actors, institutional frameworks, social needs, and public policy alternatives learned from different experiences and situations. The complexity of this challenge is quite imposing even in relatively homogeneous nations. The difficulty
increases in multicultural societies with unequal regions, which is the Mexican case, and increases yet again at the international level. In the international case, even simple communication about experiences faces obstacles of distance and language, as well as the fundamental challenge of communicating similarities between far-flung locations. Rich documentation of innovative experiences, while not an impossible task, is a specialized one that requires resources dedicated to this purpose.

At present, innovation documentation in Mexico can be described as follows:

- The universe of innovation processes is insufficiently documented, resulting in minimal use of collective memory and knowledge.
- The format of this documentation makes it difficult to be communicated and recognized by other local actors to fit specific situations.
- Insufficient instruments of interaction for transferring this information from one municipality to another are an impediment to learning and replication.
- Under these conditions, the dissemination and replication of good practices tends to be oral and circumstantial. Documentation must become more organized and systematic.

6. Originality and Replication of the Innovation

To identify and evaluate innovation requires criteria that allow us to distinguish it from any procedural and structural changes that are not important to the innovation’s ultimate goal: that is, to improve government for the benefit of society. As a consequence, these criteria must be attached to the innovative program. Definitions used by international institutions are useful in this regard, as are the innovation criteria established by Local Agenda 21 provided they are adapted to the national context where they will be applied.

To be identified and evaluated as innovations, programs must be compatible with the objectives of UN-HABITAT Local Agenda 21, since they reflect universal social interests. Based on the GLMA data, we can identify two useful complements to the criteria to evaluate and identify innovations: one is related to the immediate context, including the antecedents of this context; and the other is related to the horizontal scenario of other municipalities, including variables of local diversity.

With reference to the immediate context, a program can be called innovative if it differs from typical practices in similar or parallel areas, whether contemporary or not. Therefore, both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions are taken into account. Because of its innovative content the program or process acquires an original profile that is noticed by the actors involved.

Another feature of the immediate context is related to whether the innovation is limited in scope. Thus, if the innovation is transferred to a broad range of municipalities – the horizontal context – it may lose its original intensity. In other words, an innovation in the immediate context can become an ordinary practice in other municipalities. The popularization of an innovation can contribute great social benefits, but may also cause the program or process to lose its innovative character. The innovation becomes routine,
without implying any loss of quality or the weakening of its social benefits and relevance.

Thus, an experience can be described as innovative in the horizontal context if it contributes to the collective knowledge base. Innovative experiences, in their most evolved state, have demonstrable differences from both the immediate and horizontal contexts. Further, they incorporate not only theoretical but also practical elements that benefit local society and its institutions.

For this reason, the concept of innovation must be distinguished from the concept of best practices, considering that lack of novelty does not imply that it is not a best practice. Innovation’s diffusion, transference and replication are not the same as best practices; in our view, “best practices” correspond only to the initial phase of the experience and to its individual analysis.

Highly original innovations, which presuppose special conditions, resources and social actors, have a low probability of replication in comparison to more routine innovations. From the perspective of their contribution to the collective knowledge base, a highly original innovation is superior to a more mundane innovation. From the perspective of social benefit, both can be effective.

The relative advantage of less original innovative experiences lies in the fact that they may be recognized more easily by external actors, given their common elements. In consequence, the cost of adaptation is lower, improving the likelihood of transference and replication.

If we look at the innovative experiences of other countries, developed or undeveloped, the seeming originality of the international cases will be increased simply because of the differences among respective national contexts. If there are few shared elements between the international experience and the potential actors interested in replicating the innovation, it will be more difficult to learn from the international case and, therefore, transference and replication will be limited. In this sense, the knowledge, analysis and communication of international experiences should be useful to replicators even designed for specific potential users.

For this reason, the originality of the innovation might reduce its probability of being recognized and replicated by others. In other words, the greater the original content, the greater the effort needed to document, analyze and adapt it to new contexts.

7. Concluding Remarks

The experiences described in this chapter allow us to draw some conclusions about endogenous capacities needed for the generation, diffusion and replication of innovative programs and good local practices. Although derived from experiences in Mexico, they may be useful to other nations and regions.

First, the presence of capacities among diverse local institutions and social actors is not the determining factor in generating innovations. Data from the GLMA show that these
capacities exist in practically all municipalities in Mexico, large or small, in one region or another, independent of political or cultural characteristics. We must add, however, that these capacities always require development, even in areas with relatively more resources.

Endogenous capacities may be limited, especially in municipalities with small populations and minimal resources. Even under these conditions, however, the development of innovative programs is feasible and can consolidate into good practices. The municipal profile largely determines the type of program, how its objectives are prioritized, the level of resources and the social actors involved. But the municipal profile in itself does not determine if capacities exist or not. Each municipality requires specific programs according to its local conditions, capacities and resources. In simple terms, no one would expect urban programs to be adopted in rural municipalities, for example. Somehow, each local context defines a range of programs based on its specific needs. In any case, this issue is separate from the debate on local capacities.

Our analysis implies that it is possible to generate, disseminate and replicate good local government practices in virtually all municipalities. The difference between one experience and another is determined by how these capacities or factors are combined; the productive interaction of capacities is the characteristic that distinguishes a successful municipal program from one that does not succeed. The social or institutional dynamic needed to generate that encounter can be defined as a capacity in itself. Given its political and electoral system, in Mexico this specialized capacity tends to be concentrated in the municipal president (mayor).

Under these conditions, proposals for generating, disseminating and replicating good practices must be oriented toward this key figure of local government. It is not an ideal situation, since it tends to make the innovation process dependent on the abilities and personal qualifications of the municipal president. At least in the short and medium terms, strategies for promoting good practices must focus on the role of the mayor as the activator of the factors and capacities of innovation. For Mexico, this means upgrading the mayors’ capacities as a specialized task with clearly defined objectives.

In addition, the diffusion, transfer and replication of good practices are subject to an effective communication process. The first challenge is to document the collective learning about the process, which must include content designed with the goal of transference and replication; this means that not all current documentation is able to help replicate good practices. In Mexico, the documentation of local government processes is slowly being compiled, but it is usually in a format that impedes diffusion and replication. Thus, any replication of good practices tends to occur through informal, oral and frequently circumstantial channels. In spite of the significant efforts of programs like the GLMA, the task of adequately documenting good practices remains in its initial phase. The good news is that there is significant potential in the available information, which, with additional work, could become valuable documentation for transference and replication.

Documentation as a communication process must transform innovative practices into information recognizable by and relevant to others. If the documentation is not properly
packaged, the good practice might appear useless to its potential adopters. This explains why peer to peer exchanges are so effective, even if the primary mechanism of communication is conversation rather than documentation. In conclusion, transforming information into useful knowledge is essential for diffusion and replication. Further, peer participation in the communication process increases the efficiency of innovation diffusion and replication.\textsuperscript{vi}

Author: Please provide the following information and changes.

Please confirm the source of all four figures in this chapter. Is it the GLMA?

Please provide a bibliography for this chapter.

In Figures 1, 2, and 3, please change the words in the bar charts to English.

In Figure 4, please center the title above the pie chart and make the border fit closer to the chart (that is, reduce the overall size of this figure).

Thank you.
3 There are three: Asociación de Municipios de México (AMMAC), the Asociación de Autoridades Locales de México (AALMAC) and the Federación Nacional de Municipios de México (FEAMM). These associations are integrated into the Mexican Municipality National Conference (CONAMM), which consolidates itself as organization and negotiator before state governments and particularly in its relationship with the federal government. Cuauhtémoc Paz, Las asociaciones municipales: nuevos actores reconstruyendo el federalismo en México, México, D.F., IGLOM, 2005, p. 174.
4 With the addition of 451 programs presented at the Award in the 2005 competition, the total number is 2,211.